

## **Your Hand Next to Mine** by **AlabasterInk**

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Bonding, F/M, Friendship, Gen, Will and Eleven not being in mortal peril for one moment

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Will Byers & Eleven, mileven - Relationship

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2017-10-14

**Updated:** 2017-10-14

**Packaged:** 2022-04-02 01:42:45

**Rating:** Not Rated

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 7,133

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

While everyone is asleep, Will Byers and Eleven take a moment to be children.

## Your Hand Next to Mine

### Author's Note:

I live for poor Will Byers and Eleven forming a sibling-esque bond, and so I wrote this to help give them a moment of happiness amongst the peril.

“Where t-there’s life there’s...hope, and n-need for...v-vi-vit-”

“Vittles,” Will Byers whispered into the darkness of the cabin. “It means food...I think. It’s a really old word.”

El’s lips rounded in understanding. Their shared flashlight illuminated the page of Will’s worn copy of *Lord of the Rings*, and somewhere in the other room Dustin’s loud snores could be heard through the tiny crack in the door. “Oh, and they need v-vittles to help them on their journey?”

“Yeah,” Will nodded. “You always need food before a long trip. If you don’t you could starve and you’d never get anywhere.”

“Dustin likes Nutty Bars,” El mused, a far-off look in her eyes as she replayed a memory in her head. “And...putting?”

Her companion snorted, good-natured like that told El he wasn’t making fun of her but was still amused by whatever blunder she had inadvertently made. “Pudding,” he corrected, “specifically chocolate pudding. Never vanilla. He hates vanilla.”

“Vanilla is bad?”

“No. Well,” he shrugged, “I don’t think so. Don’t tell Dustin, but I think it’s better.”

She giggled into her hand, flashlight shaking and causing the book on her lap to jostle just enough for them to lose the page. It put an immediate stop to their mirth, and El’s eyes widened despondently at her mistake. “No,” she murmured, fingers instantly moving to flip through the pages in an effort to find the lost spot.

“Hey, it’s okay,” the bowl-headed boy soothed. He reached across to grab at the tome and pulled it gently from her grasp with a smile. “I do it all the time.”

She slid him a side-glance that said she didn’t quite believe him.

“I do!” He defended. “Usually it’s ‘cause I’m trying to draw something and I always lose the page, but it happens.” He gave another little shrug to show her it really was alright, and this time she allowed herself to believe it. There was just something so completely earnest in the way he spoke that it was impossible not to. “Though,” and here his face took on a more apologetic expression: brow furrowed and nose twisted, “it is getting late. Hopper said he wanted to leave early tomorrow. We probably should have been asleep hours ago.”

“Oh.” She looked down at her lap, grey pajama pants only visible through the light of their torch, and pulled her knees to her chest. “Right.” The warmth emanating from the fire pit didn’t reach in here and their scant emergency blankets just weren’t enough to keep in the type of heat necessary for comfort.

They shivered.

Their surroundings resembled a bunker. Had they known of the term, they would have been more apt to call it a panic room. Stockpiled with nonperishables and a lone cot, the cramped chamber was bare of all other forms of personality. It lacked the wood paneling that made up the rest of the cabin, and the cozy touches Hopper had smuggled in over the past year of Eleven’s inhabitation were starkly missing. An air vent was the only point of access to the outside so that in the event someone had to camp out here they wouldn’t suffocate. When the door was closed it was impossible to find. Which was, of course, the point.

Anyone stumbling upon the cabin couldn’t know Eleven was ever there.

“But,” Will began into the pregnant silence, “I guess I’m not that sleepy, yet. You?”

El vigorously shook her head. No, sleep was not something she

wanted to do.

“Well, if we’re not going to sleep, what do you want to do?”

What did she want to do? It was a question El still had trouble coming to terms with. Very rarely in her life had anyone ever asked what she wanted. Even with her friends, the word “want” was scarcely used. Considering the circumstances, this was understandable - no one seemed to be doing anything they “wanted” to do - but still, El couldn’t deny it felt nice to hear. They were living very much by necessity at the moment. It was...good to think about wanting something.

She eyed the book. They’d been reading for a while. Rather, Will had been reading and El had taken turns plucking out little paragraphs like a five-year-old trying to read their first chapter book. The only problem being that El still hadn’t gotten through the basics of *Dick and Jane*. But hey, she tried.

Papa had always been more interested in her abilities than her education.

“Do you want to keep reading?” Will soft voice broke through her musings. His sunken eyes were trained on where her fingers had delicately begun to trace the book’s pages, and Eleven was all at once struck by how skeletal he looked. The shadows created by their solitary light source spun divots out of his flesh, and Eleven had little doubt she could lift him up and not suffer a single nosebleed. Shave his head and put him in a hospital gown and he would have fit right in at the lab.

The thought made her stomach turn painfully.

She shook her head, hand drawing back to her lap; she was tired of reading. The words had long ago begun to strain her eyes, though she’d enjoyed the story. Part of her wanted Will to continue for her, but she could only imagine how hard that would be for him if her minuscule attempts caused this much discomfort. Even her legs ached. Experience told her it would be worse come morning, but she couldn’t bring herself to move away. Will was simultaneously a furnace and cold as a corpse.

An aftereffect, she supposed, from the Upside Down.

“Okay,” Will said when she didn’t elaborate, “well, I’d say we could talk but...”

It hung in the air.

Neither one of them was much for talking and they both knew it. Without a focus, such an exchange would lead to *talking* and neither one of them was quite ready for that conversation just yet.

Will hummed in the back of his throat. Vibrations undulated through Eleven’s body, brought about from where she’d been resting against his side. It was soothing. Not quite in the same way as being nestled against Mike, but then it didn’t have to be. She liked it all the same.

“Have you ever drawn before?” Eleven felt him shift against her. He felt bigger if that made any sense, and there was a restrained quality to his voice that she’d grown to associate with people who didn’t want to get their hopes up.

She maneuvered to meet his gaze. Brown met brown (*no*, she corrected in her head, *green*. His eyes looked green.) and Eleven was stunned to find a flicker of - *excitement?* *nervousness?* *hope?* - light shining behind orbs that she had only ever seen somber.

Her heart beat rapidly in her chest. She liked the sight.

But drawing? Eleven tried to remember what that was. A hazy image of Papa telling her how good she’d been came unbidden to her mind. Her natural instinct was to shake it away, but she saw paper there, and brightly color sticks made of wax. It made her...happy. Papa dissolved against the novelty of *drawing*.

“Yes,” she answered, the image still in her head. “Once.” Papa had even let her keep the picture.

“Really?” He asked. The light El was truly beginning to enjoy grew, and she found herself smiling back at him as his lips twitched. “Do you want to do it again? I mean, we don’t have to if you don’t want, but I thought it might be-”

“Yes,” El said again. If she was surprised by her own assertiveness it didn’t register. She was too transfixed by the way Will’s whole face just radiated with that special light. Her own cheeks hurt with how wide she was grinning. “I want to draw.”

“O-okay, umm...” his doe-eyes trailed the room as if looking for something to use, but he already knew it was a moot point. Drawing was not a necessity to survival and so such supplies would not be found here. Will turned to her, face scrunching in reluctance. “Do you mind if I go outside for a second? I should have enough stuff there.”

“Mm,” El bobbed her head, though part of her was reluctant to let him go. She crushed it as easily as she had that long ago coke can.

Will beamed. “Great! Be right back.” He pulled himself up and El was suddenly left with feeling empty without his presence beside her. She shook off the sensation, telling herself it was foolish, and trailed him as he meandered his way on tiptoe out the door and into the orange glow of the adjoining chamber.

It was as if all the life had been sapped from the room.

Stale air rushed in. The bare walls seemed that much closer and her palms grew sweaty. Her eyes flickered wildly about the bunker and she brought Will’s book close to her chest. It smelled like musk and the properly moldy scent of Castle Byers. Shadows teased the edge of her little circle of light.

El inhaled deeply. She shut her eyes and concentrated. Focusing her attention, she was able to pinpoint the little vibrations of everyone else in the cabin. Dustin was abuzz with energy as usual and his snores drifted into the room like a strange lullaby, while Lucas, silent and protective, was more soothing. She could feel them; they were close together. Max was somewhere nearby, a feisty zing on the edge of Eleven’s senses. It was almost enough to make her laugh as she watched the other girl’s energy beat back Dustin and Lucas’ even in her sleep. Miss Joyce, Hopper and Mr. Bob were further away, each strategically placed around the room so as to cover every possible entrance, and Nancy, Jonathan, and Steve were huddled together by the fire, all passed out on top of each other.

She huddled closer to the wall. She wasn't alone. She wasn't...

"Mike." The air seemed to clear just with the single utterance of his name. He was a beacon to her, a star that banked all the others, enveloping everything even in here where her only lumination came from a tiny flashlight procured out of a stash of emergency items. It was enough to chase the shadows away even if the effect was only temporary.

There was a flash of red in her peripheral that startled her out of the calm Mike had blanketed her in. It was sent her mind spiraling and her heart pulsating erratically in her chest. God, if it pounded any further it would surely burst. The atmosphere froze, but it did so in such a way that she felt like she was being burned.

Something whispered.

"El?" The girl whipped around. Her eyes were wide with fright, body heaving in order to get enough air, and she swallowed back bile as she met Will's gaze.

He didn't look much better.

White knuckles gripped his bulging backpack, and a collection of cans lay sprawled at his feet. His skin was pallid, his shoulders shaking. He eyed the room wildly as if seeing something else.

And, like always, he was a void in her mind.

"Will," she uttered through shaky lips. Whatever he saw, she could only find flashes, but it was enough for her to know she didn't want it anywhere near him. "Will," she said again, pushing more confidence into her voice than she necessarily felt.

"El." He was back. Somewhat. Will's chest rose and fell at a rate that put even her's to shame, but his hazel orbs were focused. At least he was here, and not there.

"A-are you...okay?" El cringed internally. What kind of a question was that? Of course, he wasn't okay.

But, as she was beginning to understand was typical for the boy, he

hastily brushed her concern aside. “Y-yeah. I’m okay.” He cast his eyes to the fallen cans and made a hurried attempt to pick them up. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to drop these.”

He was lying. At least, he was lying about being okay. Any other person and El would have called them out on it, but Will was different. She’d brought it up only once, but that once was enough.

*“Sometimes, friends lie because the truth is too scary. Not all lies are bad, and truth doesn’t always fix things.”*

It went against everything she’d learned from Mike, but there was something about the way Will had said it that shut down any argument she could have made. Instead, she’d just filed it away for later analysis. One day, it might all make sense.

She felt the cot shift as Will sat down and began to pull out various items from his sack. His hands shook.

“So, I found this,” he began, pulling out a camper’s lamp that, when turned on, had enough power to illuminate the whole room. “I also got my crayons, paper, pencils, and then I found these paints hidden in a storage closet.” He held up one of the six cans. “Not quite sure why they were there, but I’ve got paintbrushes if you wanted to try them.”

Eleven reached out her hand to graze the handle of one of the brushes. She’d never seen anything like it. The residual fear still coursing through her settled under the novelty of discovering something so new.

“How do you...?” She waved her hand about, hoping he would pick up on what she was asking.

Will smiled. His hands steadied. “How do you use it?” She nodded and he reached over to pop the lid of the can open with one of his pencils. It lifted to reveal a shimmering blue color not dissimilar to Dustin’s eyes, and Eleven marveled.

“Okay,” Will began, leaping into his “Mr. Clarke” voice. He moved off the cot so that he was kneeling on the wood-paneled floor and



beckoned El to follow him. Her curiosity rising, she quickly maneuvered herself so that she was pressing against him and eyed as he pulled out a clean sheet of white paper. "So I already washed the brushes, which is really important 'cause you can get dust and dirt and stuff in the paint if you're not careful. That's bad," he added upon noticing her furrowed brow.

Her lips formed a little "O" and she watched, mesmerized, as he dipped the brush into the paint. "Can you put your hand like this?" He splayed his hand on top of the paper, stretching the fingers as far as they would go.

Hesitantly, not sure where he was going with this, Eleven copied him, doing the same on top of the floor. Will smiled. "Good, but..." he gently grasped hold of her wrist and moved her hand so that it was atop the paper. "Okay, now hold still."

Paintbrush carefully in his grasp, Will slowly began to trace her hand. A burst of giggles erupted from her mouth at the sensation.

"It tickles," she said, as if she needed an explanation to laugh.

"Yeah, it does that. Now, lift your hand up - *slowly!*" He added when she began to move, apparently too quickly for his tastes.

The result was a pretty little blue outline of Eleven's hand and she couldn't help the giddy tug her lips made at the sight. It was *her* hand.

"You can turn it into anything now. A lot of teachers have us make them up into turkeys during Thanksgiving, but," he shrugged, "that's kind of boring."

El wasn't sure what a turkey was or a Thanksgiving, but the picture was fun and the brush tickled pleasantly along her skin. She eyed the paintbrush greedily. Her hand, edges crusting with drying blue paint, twitched forward. "Can I...can I try?"

"Hm?" Will raised an eyebrow, before her words hit and he hastily handed over the brush. "Sure! You can trace my hand. Sound good?"

It sounded wonderful and Will was quick to procure a new piece of

paper just for the occasion. She dipped the brush back into the blue can and swirled it around, amazed.

“Careful to wipe off any extra paint,” Will pointed out. “Too much and it makes a mess.”

El bobbed her head and slowly wiped the brush against the edge of the can like she’d seen him do earlier. Then, her fingers shaking with anticipation, she brought it down beside his hand and began to trace. Blue splotches flew across the sheet, but she was having too much fun to care. It just seemed to glide about the paper.

Will giggled and teased, “It tickles.”

In the end, her attempt wasn’t nearly as neat or pretty as Will’s, but he was quick to assure her that it was great for her first attempt. “You just need to practice more,” he said as he popped open the green can. “Wanna try again?”

She did and somehow the two managed to get through the entire stack of paper in what felt like a minute. The first one turned into a turkey, though Will was quick to assure her they weren’t actually blue, and the green, red, and yellow ones became a dragon, a dog, and a lion respectively. They both were covered in paint by the end, skin cracking as it dried, and they’d abandoned the brushes at one point for something Will called “finger painting.”

El really liked that one.

By the time they were finished, the two were breathless with laughter and had long foregone checking the door in the event someone woke up. The room was meant to be soundproof anyway, especially now that the door was completely closed, but it would be just like Hopper to somehow magically know they were still up.

Will flicked away a splatter of green from El’s cheek, replacing it with the yellow stubbornly attached to his fingers. His face was flushed with exhilaration and he was still pushing down giggles as he said, “I think we’re going to need more paper.”

“Bigger paper?” The curly-haired girl requested hopefully. She’s

begun to arrange her menagerie of animal paintings into one giant portrait; all she was missing was some tape.

“Definitely.” Though he wasn’t sure how they were going to acquire such things at this time of night without alerting someone. He peeled off a particularly large splotch of red paint from his hand and tossed it onto the now messy floor. The wood looked like some type of failed splatter painting.

Actually...

Will eyed the whitewashed walls intently. The room really was bare.

“Hey, El?” He waited until he had her full attention. “What do you think about adding some more color to this room.”

Her brow creased and she stared at him for a moment before following his gaze to the walls. Will recognized the exact moment she understood. Her face went slack, her dark eyes widened and, somewhere deep inside them, a spark ignited.

“Really?” She whispered, awed by the very notion. Her body was tense and she looked about ready to leap into the sky.

Idly, Will wondered if it was possible for her to fly.

He held up one of the cans. “Only one way to find out.”

They flew to their feet, speckled brushes tight in their grasps, and launched forward with childish abandon.

“What do you want to do first?” The bowl-headed boy asked. Ideas raced through his brain at a dizzying pace and there were just too many for him to make a decision.

El tapped her lip. “It can be anything?”

“Yeah. We could paint more turkeys, or-or a wizard! No, we could make a castle or a zoo or mountains or-”

“Trees?”

"Trees?" He bit his lower lip. Will had always enjoyed nature, but trees had the unfortunate side-effect of reminding him too much of *that place*: the overgrowth, the branches that might as well have been the monster's claws, the too-loud sounds they made whenever he walked. They didn't even offer safety.

But...El looked so hopeful. He couldn't crush that.

"Yeah," he said after a minute. "We could do trees."

"Pretty trees," she added. "In the summer." Her eyes bore into the side of his head as if she knew exactly where his thoughts had wandered. She probably did.

Eleven hadn't been in the Upside Down long, but you didn't have to be for it to get into you.

"Summer," he whispered, turning the word over on his tongue as if tasting how it sounded. Slowly, so so slowly, he found himself warming to the idea. Summer was about as far one could get from the Upside Down. "Yeah, we could do that."

El smiled. It was brilliant.

They started small, each one taking a different side. Will blended colors together in order to get just the right shades of brown, and they finally popped open the white and black paints after much debate. El didn't understand how they would help offer any sort of color, while Will was much more adamant about their importance towards creating the perfect atmosphere.

Will won.

Their forest began to bloom. Will added textures, bring the trees to life, and El, her drawings simplistic only from lack of experience, added a few pink flowers here and there. They stood on the cot in order to reach higher, skin becoming more and more indecipherable from under all the paint. They giggled and yelped as their brushes fought for space. A yellow sun beat down on the leaves, one so realistic they could almost feel its warmth.

It was beautiful.

"You're really good," El said as she compared their work. Will's side was breathtaking. It had depth and life and it was almost eerie how tangible everything seemed. She felt that if she tried she could just keep walking right through the plaster and enter what was clearly an enchanted forest. Her own painting was abysmal in comparison.

"Thanks," he blushed. "So is your's. I love the flowers." She shot him a glance drowning in disbelief. The flowers looked like she'd slammed the brush down somewhere and pushed too hard. "I do! You've never painted before today, right? I'd say you're already better than Mike."

"Really?" El wasn't sure how that made her feel.

"Definitely. You should've seen his last attempt. Mrs. Kimbolt - our second-grade teacher - almost pulled the brush right out his hand it was so bad."

"It was?"

"Yep. Poor Mike hasn't painted since." El felt like she should have been defending her not-quite-more-than-friend, but the way Will's eyes danced with mirth put a stop to that urge quickly. She'd spent enough time with Dustin to know that friends could make fun of each other without being mean about it.

She was sure Mike would forgive her this one laugh.

"You just need more practice," Will declared, mouth sliding into a grin. "And that's just perfect for us 'cause we have three more walls that need painting and only so much time to do it. So," he lifted up one of the brushes, "what should we do next?"

They ended up extending the forest, only this time Will added a castle (affectionally named Castle Friendship), and little miniatures of their friends appeared on the horizon. Dungeon Master Mike stood at the head, while Will the Wise Wizard cast spells against what might have been a dragon named Billy. Dustin the Dwarf and Sir Lucas the Daring Knight appeared next to sly Rogue Max and the Sorceress Eleven as they all fought their shared enemy together to rescue Princess Nancy.

The forest then traveled to the next wall where it thinned out into a clean white beach and shimmering ocean. Neither of the children had ever been to the beach before (unless the gravel of the lake next to Will's great-aunt's house counted), and so they only had what they'd seen on TV for reference, but it still turned out pretty good. El had added a palm tree.

Admittedly, it looked like a lump with some green hair poking out of the top, but Will still praised the attempt and she figured that was all that mattered.

"Okay," Will said, depositing his paintbrush into the mostly empty green can, "we have one wall left."

"But our paint's gone," El bemoaned. It was a wonder they'd managed to spread it out as far as they did, but she attributed that mostly to the room's small size and their own learned talent for stretching out necessities.

Will shrugged. "Not all of it. We still have a little left." Mostly black and a little red. The blue was almost entirely gone.

"Not enough."

"No, I guess not."

And didn't that just ruin the flow?

"Hm," Will mused. He eyed the paints as if doing so would spark some latent idea he had yet to reach. Sadly, it just made him look a little constipated. El was kind enough not to point this out. "I guess..." he mused after a moment, running an already caked hand around the rim of the tawny can. "I guess we could use our hands."

El's face twisted. "Finger painting?" That wouldn't be enough to cover the wall.

"Kind of." He grabbed the brush and coated his hand - from fingers to palm - in the yellow liquid. Then, without preamble, he slapped it onto the white plaster, held it there for a second, and pulled away. In its place was a perfect imitation of his hand.

His companion was entranced.

“There!” Will declared. “We can just fill it up like this. You try.” He handed over the brush and El enthusiastically ran it across her own palm. She then slapped it right next to Will’s. It came out perfect.

“More?” She questioned. El didn’t want to let go of the paintbrush.

Will laughed. “Definitely.”

They finished off the blue and green entirely, leaving an array of mostly red and yellow handprints along the wall. Most of the colors ended up on their pajamas, but that was okay as it was quite evident they’d never be able to clean them anyway. The duo danced around each other, each time trying to find a new empty spot to claim with their hands.

Which, of course, ended in disaster.

El, dizzy with lack of sleep and exhilaration, stumbled backward. Her hand - freshly painted with some of the last drops of vermillion - instinctively reached out to keep her balanced and she inevitably ended up pressing her palm into the now dry mural of their castle.

She stopped, stunned. Her blood ran to ice.

“No,” El breathed out. Tears sprang to her eyes and she brought her hands up to her mouth in horror. It left a stain not dissimilar to blood along her cheek.

She’d ruined it. She’d ruined it, she’d ruined it, *she’d ruined it!*

“El!” It was his arms more than his shout that brought her back, and only now did she realized she’d been hyperventilating. The cans shook.

“I-I-” she stuttered. “I ruined it. I-”

“No!” Will’s grip tightened around her shoulders. “You didn’t ruin it.”

“But-”

“You just signed it.”

What? Her eyes narrowed in confusion. “Signed it?”

“Of course!” Will nodded emphatically. “All artists have to sign their work when they’re done so that people know who did it.”

“They...do?”

“Yeah. In fact...” He turned around, focus highlighting on the remains of the little blending of purple he’d made for their friends’ costumes. Dipping his hand in the paint, he slapped his next to her’s on the wall, signing it. “There! Perfect.”

“Perfect,” El mimicked. She sniffled back the snot that had gathered during her little episode.

“Well, almost.” To El’s further confusion, Will then went back to the black paint and picked up a tiny brush. Under his handprint, he used the paint to print out one word:

***Will***

“There,” he declared, turning the brush over to her. “Now it’s your turn.”

“My-?” Her eyes lowered to the floor. A sudden overwhelming flush of shame erupted in her belly. “But...”

Will cocked his head. “El?”

“I-I don’t-” She bit her lip hard enough to turn it white and heard him shift beside her.

There was a brief note of silence and then, “You don’t know how to spell your name, do you?”

Jerkily, she shook her head. To her utter humiliation, she felt the tears begin to gather once more and she brushed a finger under her nose as she sniffled. It left a streak of red behind as if her nose had bled sideways.



“Well, we’re going to have to fix that, then.”

Her head shot up. “What?”

“I said we’re going to have to fix that. Right now.” His face was a rock of determination and he flashed her a shockingly bright smile. “Do you know your ABCs? I mean you were reading pretty well earlier, so...”

“ABCs?” She straightened. El knew words and sounds mostly from observing and mimicking others, but she’d never heard of anything like the ABCs.

“I guess not.” He twirled the black coated brush between his fingers and hummed low in thought. “Okay,” Will stated after a moment. “So the ABCs are the basis for pretty much everything to do with reading and writing. This,” he walked up to one of the trees, “is the letter A. The big one is it in capital form and the small one is called lowercase,” and he painted the two letters along the trunk.

Will went to the next tree. “This is B.” Then the next. “C.” The next. “D.” And so on, until almost every tree had an upper and lower case letter on it. “There’s a song that helps you remember it too, but I don’t think we have much time to go over it all. I can teach you later if you’d like.”

She did. She very much did. The letters were as enchanting on their own as they were together.

“We can go over them all later, but for your name, these are the only ones you need to know.” He pointed to the fifth tree. “This is *E*. You’ll use it to start your name. This one,” Will indicated to the twelfth tree, “is *L*. That’s the second letter, and the only other one you need.”

“That spells...Eleven?” She’d always assumed words that took longer to say had longer spellings.

But Will very quickly shook his head. “No. Just El. Eleven isn’t a name.”

“Oh.” She liked how that sounded then.

"Do you want to write it out? Under your hand?"

El's head bobbed. "Yes."

"Great!" Will beamed. "So the first letter of your name is always capitalized, and the rest are lowercase. Make sense?"

"I think so." So, she used the big *E* and the lower *L*.

Hesitantly, she dipped the brush back into the black paint and brought it up to her accidental handprint. With shaky writing, she made a passable *E* and then a shorter *L*.

It looked...kind of clunky.

Despondent, El turned to Will, hoping he could fix it in some way, but the boy was already scrutinizing her work with a heavy intensity that made her palms sweat. What had she done wrong? Was he mad at her?

Her stomach rolled at the very thought.

*Please, she begged, please don't let him be mad.*

"Nope," he stated a second later with a shake of his head. "That won't work."

"W-wha-" Oh God, she might throw up. He really was angry.

He took the brush from her limp fingers - El, herself, too scared to fight him - and dipped it back into the can. She expected him to cross out her obviously horrible attempt, and so was flummoxed when instead he drew another lowercase *l* next to her's and then another *E* to spell out *Elle*.

The girl was shocked. *What in the world?*

In contrast, Will only tossed her a triumphant glance. "There. That's better. What do you think?"

What did she think? She didn't even know.

Her confusion must have shown because Will's eyes softened and he took hold of her hand. "El is a nickname, short for Eleven. But *Elle* is a name. Your name. Do you like it?"

El, or rather *Elle*, could only nod.

She had a *name*.

Will, as was his nature, instantly understood. "Good. I'm glad."

A bubble of euphoria burst from her lips in the form of a laugh, and she found herself smiling so wide it hurt. It was like learning the word "friend" all over again.

"Hey," Will nudged her. There was a twinkle in his eye Elle was quickly coming to love. "Wanna know what would make this even better?"

"What?"

He tugged her hand. "Come on."

Turned out, "better" meant leaving the bunker for the main room. The fire had long since gone out, though its warmth remained. Gentle snores and breathing were the only sounds to be heard outside their feet tiptoe-ing along the wood. Through the windows, false dawn was just beginning to brighten the horizon.

"Mike," Will whispered into the taller boy's ear. "Mike."

Mike let out the low groan of someone who did not want to wake up, and Will indicated to Elle. Funnily enough, he didn't even have to say anything for her to realize what he wanted.

She bent down close to Mike's ear and said, "Mike. Mike, you need to get up."

"Hmm," the boy groaned again. His eyelids shuttered as he drifted into wakefulness. "El?" He slurred. "Wha'swro'g? Di'they'fin'us?"

Elle giggled and was all too aware of the beyond exasperated eye-roll Will shot their way.

“Nothing’s wrong. I want to show you something.”

“Sh’mee? Sho’mee wha’?” Mike’s eyes cracked open, barely.

“It’s a surprise, so you have to be quiet.”

“Huh?” Mike finally managed to sit up on his elbows, blinking away sleep. “A su’prise?”

“Yeah,” Elle nodded, “but *shhh*.”

Mike sighed, gaze lingering with a sort of longing at his warm sleeping bag. Unfortunately, this was Elle, and Mike couldn’t bring himself to deny her anything. “Fine.” He unzipped himself from the sack as silently as possible and stood up wobbly. Only once he was on his feet did he notice Will and the confusion on his face grew.

“Will? What’s going - wait.” He eyed them closer. “Is that paint?”

“*Shh*,” Will held up a blue finger to his lips. “It’s a surprise.”

Well, that didn’t answer anything. The trio spent the next twenty minutes trying to get Lucas, Max, and Dustin up from their slumber, and by the time they were finished Mike was wide awake and sunlight was beginning to trickle into the cabin.

“Alright, come on.” Will lead them back towards the panic room, sharing only a small conspiratorial smirk with Elle.

He opened the door just enough for them all to fit through on their sides as he didn’t want to flood the room with the light from the camper’s lamp. The bunker was almost too small for them all to fit inside, but that didn’t stop their friends from pulling up short almost immediately anyway. Will closed the door.

“Whoa,” said Dustin, for the first time rubbing his eyes from something other than sleep.

“What the hell...?” Max added. Her mouth had fallen open and her eyes were wide as she tried to come to grips with what she was seeing.

Lucas sputtered. "Did you guys sleep at all?" Of course, the answer was obvious even before they shook their heads.

Mike was silent. He was too shocked by the strange amalgamation of artistic skill and obvious lack of, to say anything.

"Dude!" Dustin shoved passed the others, unheeding of the paint now staining his bare feet. He jabbed a finger to the castle. "Is that us?"

"Wait, what?" Max questioned immediately. She was instantly beside him, blue eyes focusing on the characters atop the hill. "Holy shit, it is!"

"This is so cool!"

Any aggravation about being woken seemed to be instantly forgotten as their friends moved in to observe their work closer. Mike's expression was still hanging somewhere between stupefaction and awe, but his fingers trailed along the murals just far enough to feel the coolness of the paint but not enough to smear it.

He edged closer to Lucas, who was marveling at the detail on his character's armor. "Is that my sword?" The other boy asked, wide-eyed. "Wait - is that Billy?"

Indeed the dragon did have Billy's trademark hair and the piercings in its ears left little doubt to anyone keen enough to make the connection.

Will hefted a shoulder.

"Oh-ho!" Max laughed triumphantly, baring her teeth like a predator happening upon easy prey. "Oh, I like it."

As his friends continued to gush over the picture, something warm appeared at Mike's shoulder, and his senses were instantly hyperaware of maple syrup.

"Mike," El murmured. She took his hand in her's, thumb brushing his knuckles. Flecks of paint chipped off and fell to the floor. Mike was instantly enthralled. His felt his face heat with the sudden rush of blood and just knew his skin had to match.

It would have been embarrassing if her soft smile wasn't such a distraction.

"Do you like it?" She asked, head tilting towards the artwork.

"Y-yeah," he stumbled. Mike was only vaguely aware of snickers being thrown his way by the others, but couldn't even bring himself to care. Not when she looked so happy. "They're incredible."

El beamed. "Thanks. It was mostly Will, but look!" Her delicate (*blue, green, yellow, black, red, white*) hand shot towards one of the trees. On it was the letter A. "Will's been teaching me."

"He's been-?" Mike flashed his best friend a stunned glance before understanding hit. "El, that's great!"

"Mm," she bobbed her head once, eyes shutting with unrestrained happiness. "And look!" She pointed to another part of the wall where two handprints - one red, the other purple - stood out in stark contrast to the grassy surroundings. Under each one was a name.

***Will***

***Elle***

"It's my name!" Her face was alight with joy, infecting all the others to the point where they themselves were sharing every inch of it with her. True, it didn't sound any different from El, but it certainly felt different; like sinking into a warm hug.

"Elle," Lucas found himself saying first. He almost seemed to be testing it. "I like it."

"Definitely," Max supported. She tossed an arm around the smaller girl's shoulder and hugged her. "It fits."

"Now all you need is a last name and you're set." Dustin shot Mike a sly grin that had the other boy's face burning. "Just gotta find the right one, I guess."

"Shut. Up." Mike tried to elbow his friend in the stomach, but the curly-mopped boy danced out of the way with all the finesse of

someone who'd done it a million times before.

"A last name?" Elle questioned. She needed two names?

Lucas rested a hand on her shoulder. "Yeah, like how my last name is Sinclair or Max's is Mayfield. It tells people what family you're from."

"Oh." She looked down at her bare feet. The only family she'd ever been a part of was one she'd never wanted to be in, but then, Mike had promised-

"H-hey! That's okay. I mean you don't-"

"Byers," Will cut Lucas off. He took hold of her hand. "Your last name can be Byers. I've always wanted a sister and," he mirrored Dustin's grin, "I don't think adoption is quite how Mike wants you to take his last name."

Elle didn't understand why the rest of their friends erupted into howls and - in the case of Max - a slap to Mike's back, but she did find it interesting how Mike's face seemed to invent a new shade of red. It was cute.

"Will, I hate you," but it was said with such mortification Elle knew he didn't really mean it.

Judging by the far too pleased expression gracing Will's features, Elle figured he knew it too.

"Just saying," he shrugged, "but I did have another reason for waking you guys up beside showing you this before Hopper has the chance to usher us all out of here."

"Hm?" Even Elle looked questioning as Will reached down and picked up one of the paintbrushes. He held it out for someone to take.

"See, I was thinking, the wall still looks a little unfinished with just mine and Elle's hands up there, so..." he trailed off.

Max spoke up first. "Wait, you want us to add our hands? Why?"

“Yeah,” Dustin agreed. “I mean you guys painted it, and aren’t you always going on about artists having signatures or something.”

“Well,” Will rubbed the back of his head, “yeah, but I think it would look better if you guys were up there, too.”

His friends exchanged glances before, as one, they all blossomed into excitement.

“I call green!”

“There’s no green left, idiot!”

“Why were there this many colors in storage anyway?”

“How about red?”

“Oh no - orange.”

Mike ended up taking the last of the red, despite the fact that Max had tried to get her claws into it first. She ended up with what remained of the orange, sending Dustin and Lucas into a small fight on who got to match her color. Eventually, Dustin won by trickery and Lucas, to his consternation, was left with the purple.

A minute later, four more handprints joined the wall. If Mike’s was a little closer to Elle’s than was necessary no one commented, though they did send him some jokingly suggestive and teasing winks afterward.

“And now for the final touch,” Will said. He offered the black paintbrush to Mike. “You have to sign it.”

Later, when everyone else finally woke up and Hopper had finished his spiel on the importance of sleep and the dangers of paint fumes (“*I don’t give a crap even if the air vent was a goddam window!*”), everyone would quickly gather together to collect their things and hightail it out of the cabin for somewhere more secure. They had to get out before they were discovered and had no time to marvel at art.

It didn’t matter. It wasn’t there to be admired anyway.



When the left, they left no evidence they were ever there. No evidence with perhaps the exception of a hidden room, in a hidden cabin. And later, after the dust had settled, the blood had dried, and new nightmares made themselves at home in their minds, the children would come back and trace the names written under smaller hands.

***Will***

***Elle***

***Mike***

***Lucas***

***Max***

***Dustin***

And, despite everything, it would even make them smile.

**Author's Note:**

Hope you all enjoyed! Thank you for reading!